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THE GENESIS OF *RUY BLAS*

Almost a score of plays and memoirs have been suggested as the sources of *Ruy Blas*. It is not my purpose to add to this list, but to inquire how the first idea of the play came into Hugo's mind, what this idea was, and how it influenced his choice and use of sources. Before such questions can be answered, it is important to know what these sources were. I shall therefore first summarize the conclusions established by the scholarship of recent years in regard to them.

1. The historical background, the Spanish setting and manners, the character of the heroine, and certain minor incidents and persons are derived chiefly from the *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* by the Comtesse d'Aulnoy. This fact, already indicated by Auguste Vitu in his *Mille et une nuits du théâtre*,¹ has been thoroughly proved, with a detailed criticism of Hugo's methods of adapting history and geography to his needs, by M. Morel-Fatio in his *Etudes sur l'Espagne*.²

2. The main plot of vengeance and love, in which Salluste, in order to avenge himself, disguises his romantic lackey as a nobleman and seeks by the resulting love affair to compromise the queen, is apparently derived from a historical event, the marriage of Angelica Kauffmann to the impostor Horn, which was made known to Hugo by his friend Rabbe's article in the *Biographie universelle et portative*, and by Léon de Wailly's historical romance *Angelica Kauffmann*.

¹ Paris, 1890, VII, 97 f., lecture of April 2, 1879. Some details, though not so many as Vitu believed, may be due to Henri de Latouche's play, *la Reine d'Espagne* (Paris, 1831) which is itself modeled on the memoirs of Mme d'Aulnoy.

² Paris, 1888, pp. 177-244. He mentions a number of other works used by Hugo for names and financial details, among which the only one of importance is Vayrac's *Etat présent d'Espagne* (Paris, 1718).

This source has been established by M. Lanson in a recent article.¹ Formerly it had been generally supposed that the revenge plot came from Bulwer's *Lady of Lyons*. M. Lanson has shown that as the accounts of Angelica Kauffmann were much more readily accessible to Hugo than the *Lady of Lyons* was, and as the similarities existing in the two plays also occur in the novel, there is no reason to suppose that Hugo owed anything to his English contemporary.

3. In an excellent article,² "la Genèse d'un drame romantique: *Ruy Blas*," the most complete treatise on the sources of this play, M. Rigal, developing a suggestion of M. L. G. Pelissier, has established the fact that the political acts of Ruy Blas as ruler of Spain through the queen's favor and despite the opposition of the nobility, together with his downfall and the efforts of the lovers to save each other, were largely inspired by the *Struensee* of Gaillardet, a play acted at Paris in 1833.³

4. M. Rigal has also pointed out that the comic amplifications of the fourth act are derived from a farcical trilogy called *le Ramoneur Prince*, *Barogo*, and the *Mariage de Barogo*, probably the work of Maurice de Pompiigny. He reviews various other plays that have been called sources of *Ruy Blas*, but finds in them nothing of real importance.

The conclusion that M. Rigal draws from his investigation is that the play results, not, as the author would have us believe, from the development of an abstract idea, but from the meeting in Hugo's mind of the three principal sources.⁴ He does not tell us, however, how the idea of the play was first conceived. Indeed, one can scarcely go farther than he and M. Lanson have gone without the aid of testimony furnished by Hugo himself or by someone who learned from him how he first thought of writing the play. If we return a moment to Vitu, we shall find that he attempted to explain the play by this method. In his second lecture⁵ on *Ruy Blas* he

¹ "Victor Hugo et Angelica Kauffmann," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1915, pp. 392-401.

² *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1913, pp. 753-88.

³ Rigal shows that Hugo may also have used the *Struensee* of Alexandre Duval, published at Paris in 1822, but he finds it far less important than Gaillardet's play. Certain suggestions may have come, as Vitu thinks, from Mme d'Aulnoy's account of Valenzuela, whose case will be discussed below. Cf. Mme d'Aulnoy, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 45 f., and Vitu, *op. cit.*

⁴ For Rigal, writing before Lanson, these are Mme d'Aulnoy's *Mémoires*, Gaillardet's *Struensee*, and Bulwer's *Lady of Lyons*.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 111, 112.

declares that while at first he did not dare guess the purely psychological point round which the poet's thought first developed, he now knows what this was through a friend in whom Hugo had confided the necessary information. This primitive idea was inspired, he says, by the passage of Rousseau's *Confessions* in which Jean Jacques describes his feelings while he believed himself to be in love with the daughter of the man he was serving as a lackey. "Au point de départ," exclaims Vitu, "voilà tout *Ruy Blas*!"

Now we may well question the value of this anecdote. We do not know who Vitu's friend was, nor have we Hugo's exact words. Even if we were sure that Hugo made this assertion, we could not attach much importance to an oral statement reported in 1879 about a source used in 1838. Moreover, it is impossible to find the plot of *Ruy Blas* in the simple episode of a lackey's sighing in vain for his mistress. There is no verbal likeness between the passage¹ and any part of *Ruy Blas*. Even if we admit that Hugo learned from Rousseau's account of his feeling for Mlle de Breil the charm of such a love affair, we have still to find a central idea that could give rise to the plot as we know it. In view of the lack of authority for the anecdote and the small amount of information it contains, it is not surprising that most scholars have neglected Vitu's theory in studying the sources of the play. But is there no direct evidence, better authenticated than this, that will tell us how the play was conceived? I have found such evidence in an unexpected quarter.

When Hugo returned to Paris after his exile, he left behind in Guernesey certain papers which, sold for a few shillings during a house-cleaning, came ultimately into the possession of Samuel Davey, a London expert in autographs, who bound them under the title *Journal de l'Exil*. They were then examined by M. Octave Uzanne, who published the results of his investigation in *Scribner's Magazine* for November, 1892,² and in a brochure that appeared at Paris the same year.³ According to Uzanne, the manuscripts should be called *The Table-Talk of Victor Hugo at Guernesey*. He identifies

¹ Cf. Rousseau, *Confessions*, Part I, Book III, pp. 162 f., in the edition of Thomine et Fortié (Paris, 1823, 1824).

² Pp. 558-76.

³ *Une curiosité littéraire. Excursion à travers un MS. inédit de V. Hugo: Les propos de table du poète en exil.* Paris: Administration de l'Art et de l'Idée, rue St. Benoît, 4°. The anecdote is given on pp. 44 and 45.

them as the diary of Hugo's daughter Adèle,¹ kept from July, 1852, into the year 1856. As he puts it, the writer must have amused herself "by noting every evening the detailed conversations—literary, artistic, political, economical, aesthetic, and dramatic—held every day during the repasts of the Titan in exile." The fact that Victor Hugo's hand is visible in numerous corrections suggests that the poet read and verified his daughter's manuscript. Uzanne declares that Hugo's executors, Meurice and Vacquerie, acknowledged the "authenticity of these dialogues and anecdotes." Among them is recorded the following conversation on the nature of inspiration, which took place probably in 1854:

Auguste Vacquerie. I should believe that man is nothing more than an instrument on which the spirits play, that the phenomenon of inspiration, for example, is produced not by the labor and the creation of man but by an idea, a sort of spirit that takes its place in the brain of man. Thus, in my own case, this is so true that I have been ten years unsuccessful in finding some idea, which finally came to me all at once, at the moment when I least expected it. . . .

Victor Hugo. Inspiration comes to me in exactly the opposite way. There is in all my work not a single idea, not one line, that I have not sought for; not a single word that I have not meditated on. Thus, do you know how the idea of *Ruy Blas* came to me? I wanted to represent a minister invested with absolute power, the undisputed ruler of a great kingdom; when he has arrived at the highest degree of power, one day, amid his courtiers and his flatterers, there enters to him an unknown man who commands him as his master. That is the idea from which *Ruy Blas* came.

That such a scene appealed to Hugo as a suitable foundation for a play will surprise no one familiar with his love of antithesis and a sudden reversal of fortune. The contrast between the apparent and the real power of the two men in the scene described illustrates one of Hugo's commonest characteristics. The fall at the moment of greatest joy recalls Hernani forced to take poison just after his marriage, or Triboulet finding that he has killed his daughter just as he is gloating over his supposed vengeance upon her seducer.

The fact that Hugo gives this scene a very important position in *Ruy Blas* and treats it much as in the reported conversation, also confirms the truth of the anecdote. The third act shows Ruy Blas as absolute ruler of Spain. After a scene with the governing nobles,

¹ He originally supposed them to be the work of François Victor Hugo, but in an article which appeared only last September he states that Meurice had told him that the diary was written by Adèle. See the *Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et des Curieux*, September, 1916, cols. 118-21. My attention was called to this article by Professor A. Schinz.

whom he orders about, a scene with the queen, who admits her love for him, and a monologue of joy, a man wrapped in a great mantle enters, marches up to him, and forces him to accept him as his master.

Finally, in *Victor Hugo raconté*¹ we are told that Hugo originally intended making this third act the first of his play:

Ruy Blas, premier ministre, duc d'Olmedo, tout-puissant, aimé de la reine; un laquais entre, donne des ordres à ce tout-puissant, lui fait fermer une fenêtre et ramasser son mouchoir.² Tout se serait expliqué après. L'auteur, en y réfléchissant, aima mieux commencer par le commencement, faire un effet de gradation plutôt qu'un effet d'étonnement, et montrer d'abord le ministre en ministre et le laquais en laquais.

This quotation confirms the statement that this scene represented the germ of the tragedy. Note that if the scene were acted at the beginning of the play, Salluste would be as unknown to the audience as the intruder of whom Hugo had first thought. He was obliged to give up this detail of his plan when he moved the scene into the third act.

The original idea of the piece is not, then, an act of revenge, or the love affair of an ill-assorted couple. It is rather the sudden fall from power of a prime minister at the command of an apparently insignificant person. Now this idea came to Hugo, as Rigal has shown, from the *Struensée* of Gaillardet. In both plays a reforming prime minister is deprived of his power shortly after a love scene between him and the queen, following a scene in which, for the good of the people, he has lorded it over a privy council of corrupt nobles. In both plays the fall from power is sudden and is caused by an apparently powerless person, for *Struensée* is arrested by Banner,³ whom, only a few scenes before, he had forced to resign from the council.

Thus supplied with his first idea, Hugo enlarged and complicated his plan by introducing from the story of Angelica Kauffmann the theme of a noble's avenging himself upon a woman by means of an amorous lackey. This would not only add interesting and picturesque details to the original conception, but it would explain the hero's obedience to the villain's command without the introduction

¹ *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo* (Paris, Hetzel), II, 392.

² This is not strictly accurate, for we know that the four lines in which Salluste orders Ruy Blas to pick up his handkerchief were added after the original draught was made. Cf. Pierre Dauze, *Revue Bibliographique* (Paris), July-October, 1898, pp. 389-94.

³ Act IV, scene 14.

of royal authority. It was, perhaps, before this addition that Hugo planned to begin his play with the scene of the hero's downfall. It may well have been the difficulty of making the spectators understand such a scene when the more complex plot was planned, added to the already existing need for interesting them in the characters and for moving rather than surprising them, that forced him to postpone this scene till the middle of the third act.

The question of time and place, of a historic background and local color, would now be of great importance. Hugo's interest in Spain is well known. He may have been led to Mme d'Aulnoy, as Morel-Fatio suggests, by the popularity of the Spanish seventeenth century in the period immediately preceding the composition of *Ruy Blas*; or, perhaps, while seeking a case which resembled that of Struensée, but occurred less recently and in a larger and more picturesque country than Denmark, he ran across or remembered Mme d'Aulnoy's account of Valenzuela, the Spanish adventurer of humble origin, who, like Ruy Blas, a poet and a page, if not a lackey, became ruler of Spain by the grace of Queen Maria Anna, widow of Philip IV. Reading further in Mme d'Aulnoy's *Mémoires* Hugo learned of Charles II and his two queens, one of whom furnished him with the character, the other with the name of his heroine. From these memoirs he made most of his direct borrowings. Additions from Pompigny and other writers followed readily enough.

However much may be conjectural in this theory of the process by which *Ruy Blas* was composed, it seems safe to conclude that the original idea of the play was that of a minister's fall from power under very dramatic circumstances, rather than a story of vengeance and love; that, as Rigal holds to be generally true of Hugo, this thought came first to him as a picture rather than an abstract notion; that Gaillardet's *Struensée* supplied the first suggestion, the story of Angelica Kauffmann an important part of the plot; that less than ever is there a reason for seeing any influence of the *Lady of Lyons* on the play; and that the *Mémoires* of Mme d'Aulnoy, though extensively followed, were not employed till after other works had outlined the plot in the author's mind.

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